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ABSTRACT

A survey measured the attitudes of sixth-graders in one school district concerning the school's elementary foreign language program, with the intent of improving the program's design and content. Students identified these program strengths: organized and prepared teachers; respectful teachers; interesting lessons; positive student attitudes toward second language learning; student feelings of success; and appreciation of group work and learning games. Less than half felt grading was necessary. Students also identified several program areas needing improvement: reading and writing instruction; motivation for further language study; and student input into topical content. Results are felt to contribute to development of the elementary foreign language curriculum. Tabulated student survey responses are appended. (MSE)

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Student Perceptions of an Elementary Foreign Language Curriculum

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Student Perceptions of an Elementary Foreign Language Curriculum

The objective of this study was to evaluate student perceptions of the Catawba County Schools Elementary Foreign Language Program. Student identification of program strengths and weaknesses was considered a valuable part of program assessment since learners should be actively involved in the learning process and the curriculum should be meaningful to them.

This student perception instrument, along with other documentation, shall be considered as Catawba County makes revisions in the foreign language program. Recent changes in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for Second Languages warrant an examination of present local curriculum. In order to determine what changes in the program should be made and what parts of the program are satisfactory, system administrators decided to survey the sixth grade students with an instrument designed to measure student perceptions of the program as well as allow them to indicate possible changes for the curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was developed to gather information needed for evaluation of the foreign language program. A preliminary form of the instrument was reviewed by peers in a Measurement and Assessment Course, school administrators, and fellow teachers. After revisions, the instrument was then completed by all sixth grade students in the system. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each question by the researchers. Content analysis was used to gather information from the open-ended questions.

RESULTS

Many strengths in the present program are identified by students. According to the data, one of the strongest links in the program are its teachers. Eighty-seven percent

of the students remarked that teachers are organized and prepared for class while 74% felt that their teachers care about them and respect their feelings (Tables 6, 7). A clear majority also note that lessons are interesting and that they are eager to participate in class (Tables 1, 3, 9).

Another program strength identified by students is their positive attitude toward foreign language learning. Sixty-eight percent of respondents are glad to have the opportunity to learn a foreign language while 62% believe that the knowledge of a foreign language will help them in the future (Tables 8, 19). Evidently, students know why they are studying a foreign language and how it will benefit them. One may conclude that the teachers themselves present a positive attitude toward languages and their enthusiasm is carried over to the students.

One of the most important indicators of program success is how successful the students view themselves. Sixty-two percent of the children surveyed feel successful in their foreign language classroom. However, 25% of the students were undecided about their success (Table 12). This indecision may be due to the fact that grades are not given in the elementary foreign language program and students often depend upon grades as a measure of success. The issue of grading is being considered in the elementary program for 1995-96. Perhaps grading would give students a better indicator of success since all other subjects are measured in this manner.

As for the students' opinions of grading, it is interesting to note that only 43% of the respondents think they need to receive a grade for participation in the foreign language class. Thirty-six percent believe that grades are not necessary (Table 2). Further study into this question may reveal that the more successful and diligent students would like to have their success realized with grades. In any case, one should not be surprised that students at this age do not see the merit and relevance of this type of assessment.

Another goal of the foreign language program that is apparently being met is that of practicing proficiency. Sixty-six percent of respondents reported that they use complete, simple sentences in their foreign language class (Table 10). Instead of memorizing vocabulary, students learn to express themselves in both oral and written form through complete sentences or paragraphs. According to the students, the Catawba County program is successful in this area.

Students likewise reported strong positive feelings toward group work and learning games. Eighty-four percent responded that they like working in groups and 74% enjoy singing and playing learning games (Tables 5, 13). Cooperative learning techniques as well as songs and games are practiced in most of Catawba County's elementary foreign language classes. Student response therefore indicates that those teachers using these techniques are successfully keeping students interested. Those that are not using these techniques and who are searching for new and better approaches, may wish to begin incorporating such ideas into their lessons.

Students also identified several areas in the foreign language program that need to be studied further and perhaps changed. One area of concern involves students' apparent dislike for reading and writing activities. Only 40% of the respondents noted that they enjoy reading activities in the foreign language classroom and 68% reported that they did not want more written activities (Tables 14, 15). The whole language approach to second language learning suggests that speaking, reading, and writing must be experienced at the same time and in context in order for the learner to understand, relate, and retain the information. The student response implies that some reading and writing activities may be too simple or too difficult, or they may not be meaningful to them. Perhaps workshops on the whole language approach and a sharing session with those teachers whose reading and writing activities are successful would be beneficial to the school system.

The second area that requires further research is that of future enrollment in the next sequence of the foreign language program. At present in the middle school, enrollment in foreign language class is optional. Students may choose two electives from foreign language, drama, art, and chorus. Unfortunately, if a students opts to take band, they may not choose a second elective. These sixth graders were split in their decision to enroll in next years program. Thirty-four percent said they did plan to study foreign language in the middle school, 35% replied they did not, and 31% were undecided (Table 16).

The undecided response is perhaps the simplest to explain. This instrument was given in the fall of the sixth grade year when students are not yet concerned about the middle school and many of them are not even aware of their options or required curriculum. At this time, it is not at all unlikely that many students would be undecided about enrollment. Those that agreed that they would pursue foreign language study next year are those that are certain that they want to continue studying a foreign language. Those that disagreed perhaps are aware of their options and have decided that their talents are put to better use in another discipline. It would be interesting to do a follow-up survey in May after the sixth graders have made their final choices, and ask them why they elected to enroll or not to enroll in foreign language class.

The student perception instrument also included items that allowed students to suggest changes to enhance the curriculum. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed acknowledged that they would like for their input to be considered when deciding on what topics are to be taught (Table 11). At 56%, a majority of them would like to see more lessons on customs and traditions of French and Spanish speaking countries (Table 17). This response was supported through an open-ended statement that allowed students to write in topic suggestions. Included in these responses were holidays, monetary units, schools, art, food and cooking, sports, music, everyday life, how people dress, landmarks and famous places, and customs.

Some of these topics are presently being explored in the sixth grade through videos, slides, books, and other realia. In addition, changes being made in the present curriculum are allowing for a broad, thematic approach to instruction which will include more of the items students would like to study. Keeping in mind student suggestions, the themes being developed revolve around situations that students might encounter in a target language country. This type of approach, which is supported by the North Carolina State Department Foreign Language Consultants, will provide whole language instruction that will be more meaningful to the students.

Through this student perception instrument, the Catawba County Foreign Language supervisor and teachers have gathered much valuable information to assist in the revision of their elementary program. Areas that remain strong in the program include the positive, well-trained teachers, the use of group work, and songs and games. According to the students, areas that need further evaluation include reading and writing activities and student retention rate in the middle school program. In addition, students have indicated several topics they would like to see incorporated into the curriculum. The overall results spoke quite positively of the program, revealing that it indeed has value and is important to those students surveyed.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have implications that reach much further than the boundaries of Catawba County, North Carolina. Other school systems may wish to use a similar instrument to evaluate their foreign language program. Program evaluation provides important feedback and a measure of accountability. Feedback indicates program strengths and weaknesses and accountability supplies a strong defense for the justification of program continuance. Those in the field of foreign language education should realize how important feedback and accountability are to a FLES (Foreign Language in Elementary Schools) program. Research indicates that one contributing

factor to the failure of FLES thirty years ago was the lack of program evaluation and documentation (Heining-Boynton, 1990). Today's programs can learn from yesterday's mistakes. The use of such instruments as this student perception inventory are a positive step in the necessary process of program assessment.

REFERENCES

Heining-Boynton, A. (1991). The FLES program evaluation inventory (FPEI). Foreign Language Annals, 24(3), 193-202.

Table 1

Student Responses to the Statement," The foreign language lessons are interesting enough to keep my attention in class."

Response	Percentage
Agree	59%
Undecided	19%
Disagree	21%

Table 2

Student Resposnes to the Statement, "I think I need to receive a grade for my participation in foreign language."

Response	Percentage
Agree	43%
Undecided	20%
Disagree	36%

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Table 3

Student Responses to the Statement," I am eager to learn and participate in foreign language activities."

Response	Percentage
Agree	67%
Undecided	19%
Disagree	13%

Table 4

Student Responses to the Statement, "My parents know and support what is going on in my foreign language class."

Response	Percentage
Agree	51%
Undecided	29%
Disagree	18%

Table 5

Student Responses to the Statement, "I enjoy working with others in groups."

Response	Percentage
Agree	84%
Undecided	8%
Disagree	5%

Table 6

Students Responses to the Statements, "My foreign language teacher is organized and has his/her materials ready for the day's lesson."

Response	Percentage
Agree	87%
Undecided	8%
Disagree	4%

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Table 7

Student Responses to the Statement, "My foreign language teacher cares about me and respects my feelings."

Response	Percentage
Agree	74%
Undecided	17%
Disagree	8%

Table 8

Student Responses to the Statement, "I am glad I have the opportunity to learn a foreign language."

Response	Percentage
Agree	68%
Undecided	17%
Disagree	14%

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Table 9

Student Responses to the Statement, "I am bored and generally unresponsive in foreign language class."

Response	Percentage
Agree	21%
Undecided	18%
Disagree	61%

Table 10

Student Responses to the Statement, "In my foreign language class, we put the vocabulary words that we know into simple, complete sentences."

Response	Percentage
Agree	66%
Undecided	18%
Disagree	16%

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Table 11

Student Responses to the Statement, "I wish student input would be considered when deciding on what topics are to be taught."

Response	Percentage
Agree	63%
Undecided	27%
Disagree	10%

Table 12

Student Responses to the Statement, "I consider myself successful in the foreign language classroom."

Response	Percentage
Agree	62%
Undecided	25%
Disagree	13%

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Table 13

Student Responses to the Statement, "I enjoy singing and playing learning games in foreign language class."

Response	Percentage
Agree	74%
Undecided	14%
Disagree	12%

Table 14

Student Responses to the Statement, "I enjoy reading activities in a foreign language."

Response	Percentage
Agree	40%
Undecided	24%
Disagree	35%

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Table 15

Student Responses to the Statement, "I would like to have more written activities in my foreign language class."

Response	Percentage
Agree	13%
Undecided	19%
Disagree	68%

Table 16

Student Responses to the Statement, "Next year, I would like to enroll in a foreign language class at the middle school."

Response	Percentage
Agree	34%
Undecided	31%
Disagree	35%

Table 17

Student Responses to the Statement, "I would like to see more lessons on customs and traditions of French or Spanish speaking countries."

Response	Percentage
Agree	56%
Undecided	24%
Disagree	19%

Table 18

Student Responses to the Statement, "I believe that the knowledge I have gained in my foreign language class will help me in the future."

Response	Percentage
Agree	62%
Undecided	19%
Disagree	17%

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